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Bookshelf: If These Walls Could Talk

By Jonathan Karl

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THE HOUSE

By Robert V. Remini

(Smithsonian Books, 614 pages, \$34.95)

One day in 1858, members of Congress set a record that still stands: the largest brawl ever on the floor of the House of Representatives. The issue, of course, was slavery. Petty insults led to an all-out melee with more than 50 congressmen shoving, punching and wrestling each other as the hapless sergeant at arms swung a large mace over his head and yelled at them to get back to their seats. The reporters in the press galleries got into the act, hurling spit balls at each other. The madness crescendoed when John "Bowie Knife" Potter of Wisconsin pulled off the wig of a Mississippi congressman and declared, "I've scalped him."

This is just one of many brawls recounted in Robert Remini's sweeping history of the House of Representatives. Mr. Remini is the House's official historian, but in this volume he doesn't attempt to write an in-depth account of the past 200-plus years. Instead, he synthesizes the work of other historians and skips the arcane details. In the process, he has written a highly readable and quite entertaining survey of American history as seen from the floor of "the people's House."

Fighting on the floor was so common in the years before the Civil War that many representatives came armed with guns; one Massachusetts congressman used a rifle as his walking stick. Legislative violence of the period famously reached its zenith when a young congressman from South Carolina named Preston Brooks ran over to the Senate floor and repeatedly beat Sen. Charles Sumner over the head with a large cane, knocking him unconscious and bloodying the carpet.

Mr. Remini tells the caning incident from the House perspective. The beating came after Sumner, a fierce opponent of slavery, had railed against an elderly South Carolina senator -- Brooks's uncle, as it happened -- for sponsoring the pro-slavery Kansas-Nebraska Act. The speech was, says Mr. Remini, "one of the most abusive . . . ever delivered in Congress." Northerners in the House immediately called for a resolution to expel Brooks, but the resolution failed because every Southern representative except one voted against it. Brooks resigned anyway, only to be overwhelmingly re-elected the following year.

Of course there have also been moments of transcendent greatness in the House, starting with the very first session in 1789, when a representative from Virginia named James Madison led the effort to pass the Bill of Rights. But even the great first Congress was often driven by narrow sectarian interests; that is, after all, how it was designed.

Consider how a patch of swampland on the Potomac River became the capital of the U.S. There were three candidates for the new capital: New York, Pennsylvania and Virginia. In exchange for getting the capital, Virginia agreed to support a bill to have the federal government assume all state debts, a measure that disproportionately helped the heavily indebted states of Pennsylvania and New York. As he did in the Bill of Rights, Madison played a key role in crafting the compromise.

One of the joys in reading "The House" is the descriptions of past and future presidents, such as Madison, who make cameo appearances at key moments in the history. There is the dovish Abraham Lincoln arguing against the Mexican-American war; or John Quincy Adams, the only former president to get elected to the House, denouncing his Southern colleagues as "beef-witted blunderheads" and demanding that the clerk read out the first lines of the Declaration of Independence: "Read them sir, and let the House listen!" Both

John Kennedy and Richard Nixon make appearances in Mr. Remini's account, having been sent to the House in the first election after the end of World War II.

There's also New York's legendary Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, who served in the House before moving to City Hall. LaGuardia faced off against xenophobic colleagues who wanted to cut off the flow of immigrants to the U.S. "Is this country not made up of immigrants?" LaGuardia asked. Rep. T.N. Tinchler of Kansas lectured LaGuardia that "this chamber here is a place where we ought to think, act and do real Americanism." By allowing too many immigrants, Tinchler said, there may come a day when we will have to say "'Mr. Speaker' in Italian or some other language." Mr. Remini writes: "LaGuardia just shook his head in disbelief."

Dick Cheney, the former representative from Wyoming and Republican whip, makes a few appearances on these pages as well. Mr. Remini reminds us that Mr. Cheney was a member of the so-called "Wednesday Group," moderate Republicans who sought to counter the rising influence of back-bench conservatives, including a young congressman from Georgia named Newt Gingrich. Mr. Cheney had a conservative record in the House but a decidedly moderate demeanor.

When Mr. Remini gets to recent history, he bemoans the lack of civility, but his book makes it clear that "the people's House" has always been a raucous place and often more so than now. As heated as the rhetoric is today, Dennis Hastert has never tried to smash a cane over Nancy Pelosi's head.

But even from the perspective of more than two centuries, the House looks like a troubled institution. The past two decades have seen the resignation of a speaker of the House for the first time in history (Jim Wright); the resignation of a speaker-elect (Bob Livingston); the election defeat of an incumbent speaker for the first time since 1797 (Tom Foley); and a parade of other scandal-plagued leaders hounded out of office (most recently, Tom DeLay). Perhaps the biggest scandal is the way the House has insulated itself against competition by elevating the art of gerrymandering to a science. In 2004, only seven House incumbents were defeated. Such an incumbency protection racket calls into question whether this is really "the people's House" anymore.

Not surprisingly, the official House historian concludes his book by declaring his love for the House, saying of its members over the years: "They have served the American people extremely well." Well, sometimes.

Mr. Karl is senior national security correspondent for ABC News.

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